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Baker's Seed House



**Seeds, Plants and Bulbs
Trees, Vines and Shrubs
117 Park Street, Rutland, Vt.**

In the 1887-88 Directory of Rutland Oliver G. Baker and his son George H. Baker were listed as farmers residing on Park Street. Sidney A. Baker, the elder son, resided on Park Street with his parents but he was an engineer on the Bennington and Rutland Railroad. Fortunately he was within walking distance of the Rutland railroad yard.

On 8 November 1890 Esther Gorton Baker, Oliver's mother, died. On 30 December 1890 Oliver died of "blood poisoning". On 17 September 1892 Willard, Oliver's father, also died. Meanwhile on 20 April 1892 George H. Baker married Sarah H. Hinchey, daughter of James T. and Honora Q. Hinchey who lived at 12 Park Street. A change of generations had occurred in a very short time frame.

ELLWOOD



George H. Baker

ELLWOOD



Sarah H. Hinchey and "Gypsy"

George and Sarah resided at 73 Park Street and subsequently had three children: Immaculata (called "Ima") Baker, born 19 June 1893, Eugenie Baker Ellwood, born 9 January 1896, and George E. Baker, born 1 January 1898. Sidney never married and continued to live at the family home and to work as an engineer on the railroad. George now had his own family about which to be concerned. Only Sidney and George were there to help their widowed mother, Eugenie.



(l to r) Eugenie Q. Baker, George E. Baker and "Ima" Baker.



(l to r) June (Baker) Gorton with her mother Eugenie E. Baker stand in front of the family home at 117 Park Street.

Near the beginning of the 20th Century, Sidney A. Baker opened Baker's Seed House on the family farm at 117 Park Street where he was living with his widowed mother. Sidney financed the venture but his younger brother, George H. Baker, handled most of the physical operation. Sidney continued to be an engineer on the railroad as well as proprietor of Baker's Seed House that sold a full range of seeds, plants and bulbs. The business installed a telephone to assist in dealing with their customers. Catalogs were issued on the first of January each year to assist customers from a distance. In the city directories George H. Baker was listed as a farmer until in the 1909-10 directory he finally was listed as a florist. The 1913 directory advertisement for the firm noted that "we are sure we can please you as we have in our employ a man skilled in the making of Special pieces." Presumably that man was George H. Baker. Eugenie E. Baker, the widowed mother of Sidney and George, was also actively involved with the business until her death in 1915.

In 1916 the business became Baker Brothers Seed House with Sidney A. Baker and George H. Baker as co-proprietors. Also in 1916, George H. Baker's son, George E. Baker who was now 18, became employed at the seed house. After the death of his mother, George H.



*Sidney A. Baker, proprietor of
Baker's Seed House*

BAKER'S

Tested Seeds,
Plants and Bulbs



For Field, Farm
and Garden.

117 PARK STREET,
Telephone.

RUTLAND, VERMONT.

*Baker's advertisement in the
1903-04 Rutland Directory*

Baker and his family occupied the old family home at 117 Park Street. His brother Sidney still boarded there as he had for years.



*The buildings of Baker's Seed House at 117 Park Street prominently
advertised seeds, plants and bulbs. A chimney in the background
advertised cut flowers.*



William S. Ellwood



Eugenie B. Ellwood

On 18 April 1917 William S. Ellwood married Eugenie Baker, the 21-year-old daughter of William H. and Sarah H. Baker. The newlyweds lived at 117 Park Street in the Baker family home while William S. Ellwood continued his employment with the railroad.

On 14 October 1918 George E. Baker entered the Army and, after a short time in training at Clarkson College in Potsdam, New York, was discharged on 4 December 1918. During this time he was struck by influenza that led to his early death at age 39.

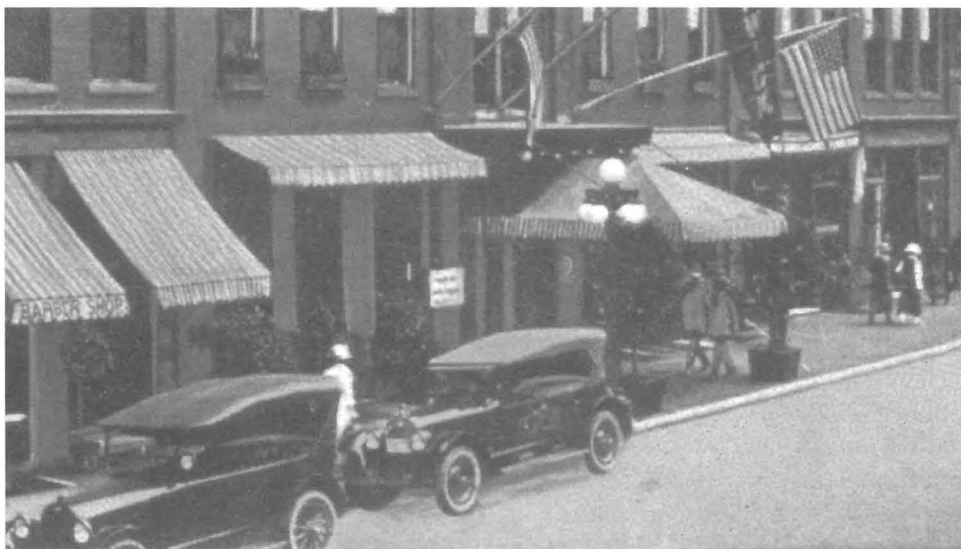
The Baker Family business grew as George H. Baker's family matured. In 1919 George E. Baker returned to his employment with the business. Meanwhile Sarah had opened a flower store in the Berwick Hotel and daughter Ima became the principal clerk there. As George H.



George E. Baker



Ima Baker



The first Baker Flower Shop was in the Berwick Hotel at the northwest corner of Center and Wales Streets. The U.S. flag is above the entrance.

Baker and his family became more involved, his brother Sidney began to ease out of the business although he continued to live at 117 Park Street. By 1922 George H. Baker was the sole proprietor of the business and William S. Ellwood, his son-in-law, had left the railroad to work in the Baker greenhouses.

On 20 January 1923, George H. Baker died after a short illness. He had been a member of the Board of School Commissioners for twenty years (1898-1914 and 1919-1923). He had served as president of the

ELLWOOD



George H. Baker died suddenly in 1923.

ELLWOOD



Sarah H. Baker took over the operation of the business.

board in 1905. In 1917 he was elected a member of the Board of Aldermen. After his death, his widow took over the business. William

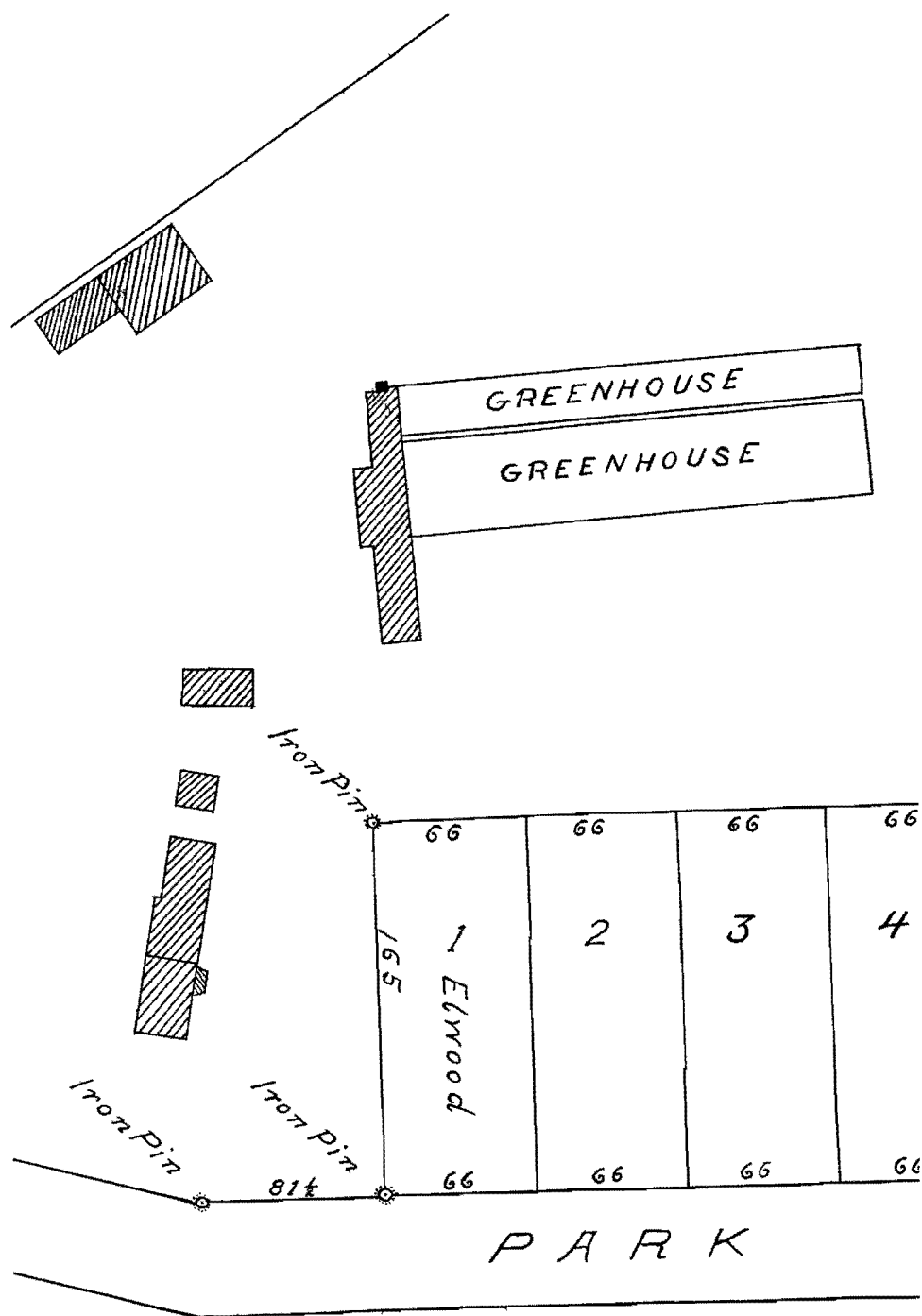
S. Ellwood became manager of the greenhouses. Eugenie handled the financial affairs of the business as well as helping with the day-to-day activities during the busy seasons. Ima continued to operate the flower store in Rutland.

In 1924 the Ellwoods built a house at 121 Park Street. William and Eugenie had three children, Eileen, born on 31 August 1921, George B. born 8 February 1924 and Priscilla Ellwood Meinking born 10 May 1926. These children were never actively involved in the business as adults. While young, Eileen and Priscilla helped during the busy seasons with such things as packaging seeds and making corsage bows. Priscilla recalled singing in the choir at St. Peter's Church at midnight Mass and being the only lady there without a corsage. Again there is evidence that not only does the shoemaker's daughter go barefoot but the florist's daughter goes without flowers. As a teenager George spent quite a bit of time helping with the business. As soon as he was old enough to get his driver's license he helped with deliveries, especially at Christmas and Easter. During the cold months a portable heater was kept in the delivery truck to protect the flowers. George recalled going to the greenhouse to fire the boiler one morning when he discovered that the night watchman had failed to fill it with water. He turned on the water and ran for the exit fearing an explosion. The next day an automatic filling mechanism was installed. Bill Ellwood had an alarm in his bedroom that would activate during the winter months if the temperature in the greenhouse dropped below a safe reading. Many a time he had to rise in the middle of the night to make sure that the flowers were safe.

The florist business was not a particularly lucrative business during the years of the Depression. It is understandable that folks could not spend large amounts of their available funds for decorative flowers when they were having difficulty supplying the basic essentials of life for their families. However, the seed and bedding plants part of the business did not suffer. Everyone had a Victory Garden during World War II.

There were certainly rewards in providing beauty for the special occasions of life, weddings, proms, holidays and even helping to cheer families during the loss of a loved one. All in all, it had to be a very satisfying occupation.

Annual catalogs were published early each year. "Greetings to Our Patrons and Friends" in the 1910 Baker's Catalog, *Tested Seeds, Plants and Bulbs for Field, Farm and Garden* gives an insight into the business philosophy of the firm.



This survey of the Park Street lots of the Baker Estate was made on 29 August 1923. The firm's buildings are located as is lot # 1 where William S. Ellwood would build a home in 1924.



*In the seedling greenhouse are: (foreground l to r) William "Bill" Ellwood and Sarah H. Baker.
In the rear are Henry W. Bride, Jr., Merrill Bride and another unidentified man.*



A view in the plant greenhouse.

"If you are among the thousands that have tried our seeds, we are sure you will see your way clear to send us your esteemed orders again. Our business has been built up, not by extravagant advertising, but by the quite sure method of furnishing such good seeds, that those who order once are sure to come again, and also to recommend us to their friends...To all who read this, whether old or prospective customers, we wish to say that we handle nothing that we do not believe to be the best obtainable, and we are sure that we have unsurpassed facilities for producing and purchasing the best seeds at a cost which enables us to quote comparatively low prices to our customers. We invite comparison with other reputable houses in this respect.

"Our invariable rule is to strive to supply the highest quality of everything. From the very day our business was founded we have never allowed ourselves to be satisfied with present attainments. Our motto is 'Advance all along the line.'

"Every fall and winter before we begin to fill orders, we make hundreds of vitality tests and are often compelled to reject hundreds of dollars worth of seeds because of faulty germination. In the summer, we also make multitudes of tests for purity and genuineness. In these ways, and by reason of our long and extensive experience with seeds, we are able to say honestly that all of our seeds, bulbs, roots, etc. are **SELECTED WITH THE UTMOST CARE.**"

The 1910 catalog had extensive offerings of seeds for flowers and vegetables. There were ninety-four offerings for sweet peas alone, including the "new gigantic orchid-flowered sweet peas of the Countess Spencer type," an indication that this flower must have been a popular feature in the gardens of that time. In the "plant department, vines and climbers" a surprising entry is "the famous Chinese Kudzu. Watch it grow! Like the magic bean vine of the fairy tale, this wondrous new vine, with ordinary treatment, will grow 70 feet in one season, turning everything it covers into leafy loveliness, and filling the air with the fragrance of its large clusters of wisteria-like blossoms...Adapted to porches, arbors, fences, rookeries, old trees, etc.! Perfectly hardy; lasts twenty-five years or more."

The Kudzu was introduced into the United States in 1876 at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. The large leaves and sweet smelling blooms of the Kudzu captured the imagination of American gardeners and it became a popular ornamental plant. Today this plant has become invasive through much of the south, covering almost anything that is in its path. Fortunately it was not hardy in this climate.

In the catalog, plants are individually shown with detailed illustrations and picturesquely described. The entry for *Salvia Splendena*

"Fireball", flowering sage reads as follows:

"Of the many sorts of salvia now cultivated this splendid novelty undoubtedly is the finest of all. It has larger flowers, and is also more full flowering than any other kind. The bushy plant, 20 inches high, is covered with long broad flower spikes with a great number of flowers of the most fiery scarlet. The plants branch freely and are profuse bloomers, the side shoots often producing four to six flowering spikes so evenly divided over the foliage and of such erect habit as to hide the foliage. It is the earliest of all flowering by the beginning of July and continuing without a break until frost. It is easily raised from seed and comes true. This made a grand display in our trial grounds.

The catalog also contained farm and garden implements like the Lang's hand-weeder, the segment one-hand corn and bean planter, "iron age" combined single wheel hoe and drill seeder, along with "insect destroyers" such as Hammond's Slug Shot and Bug Death.

The principal supplier of seeds for the Baker Greenhouses was the W. Atlee Burpee Company of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Bulbs were purchased from M. Van Waveren and Sons, N.V. of Hillegom, Holland. Among other world businesses dealing with the Baker firm were: Takii and Company Ltd. (Seedmen and Growers) of Kyoto, Japan and Clause's France Grown Seeds of Bretigny Sur Orge, France.

In addition to the greenhouses there were outdoor gardens in which nasturtiums, gladiolus, sweet peas and many annuals were grown.

Over the years the business expanded to include a wide range of floral services for weddings, funerals and other occasions. Easter was the busiest holiday when it was almost impossible to grow enough Easter lilies, calceolarias, carnations and other specialty plants to accommodate the demand. Corsages were a very popular item at Christmas and Easter as well as for school proms.

The Baker florist business depended on the family and when George E. died in 1937 and his mother, Sarah, died in 1940, William Ellwood and his wife, Eugenie, and her sister, Ima, decided to sell the business in 1945 to G. E. Hunt, a long-time Church Street florist. Hunt operated the greenhouses for a while but then sold the lands to developers. Today all signs of the buildings are gone except for the family home at 117 Park Street where it all started.

We Respectfully Submit the Following Suggestions for Your Consideration

1. That a larger vegetable diet instead of much meat possibly might be of benefit to your health and that of your family.
2. That a diet of vegetables is more economical than a meat diet.
3. That the kitchen garden is the surest way of securing fresh vegetables, as the purchased vegetable is most frequently old and inferior.
4. That if you do not plant your yard and care for it, the weeds will grow and become ugly and offensive.
5. That you plant your vegetables in long rows instead of little beds and do without stooping, the work of six hoes with our wheeled garden cultivator.
6. That the work of making a garden is as healthful a physical exercise as golf and as mentally stimulating as chess, the work for ladies and gentlemen.
7. That no house can be complete in its setting without well-kept gardens, lawns and flowers.
8. That no place can possibly be mean that has about it gardens, lawns and flowers grown from our vegetable, grass and flower seed.
9. That we buy seed in bulk that is fresh and tested; not old and returned commission seed.
10. That the superior seed we handle is here within your reach when you want it without the trouble, expense and delay of sending for it.
11. That this seed is as reasonable in price and as good seed as can be secured.
12. That in buying your seed or other supplies of us, you are keeping the dollars and pennies at home.
13. That we certainly do appreciate your trade fully.
14. That you buy at once before some varieties of seed, made scarce by the war and bad climatic conditions, be exhausted.
15. That if you will submit us a list of your future seed wants upon which we may figure, we will save you much more than the express or postage plus the cost of sending and be here to see the result of the seed we sell you.

Inside the back cover of a World War I era catalog is a listing of 15 points for consideration by the customer. They offer an interesting insight into early 20th Century life in Rutland.